

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Veterinarians in Combat During World War II

Editor's Note: *In Part I of this two-part story (June 18th¹), I described roles that veterinarians played in the Army Veterinary Corps during World War II. This partner story recounts the experiences of two veterinarians—one American and one Japanese—who served in combat zones where they were responsible for mules and horses under their charge.*

I acknowledge the friendship and support of Dr. Richard Drumm for facilitating and accompanying me on my interview with Dr. Kenneth Gumaer in 2007. I am also indebted to Japanese Nippon University veterinary student and history buff, Junya Yasuda and his family (including his veterinarian father, Dr. Hidemi Yasuda), without whose assistance and translation during my visit to meet and interview Dr. Takahema Takahashi in 2010 would not have been possible.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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By the end of World War I, the use of horses and mules in battle or in transporting or servicing troops with munitions and supplies had mostly been replaced by motorized vehicles. The Soviet Union and other eastern European forces continued to occasionally use mounted cavalry and supply horses during World War II, with great loss of equestrian life from trauma, disease and starvation. Though the United States maintained a cavalry up until the beginning of the European theatre of WW II (1939), there were relatively few places where the U.S. deployed horses or mules in combat areas.

One of those theatres was in the China-Burma-India war, where the narrow mountain passes and the dense jungle would otherwise have made travel of men, munitions and supplies impossible. Even mules, which were used instead of horses because of their sure-footedness and more reliable demeanor, were sometimes unable to scale the most treacherous mountain passes. When they refused to move any further they were, out of sheer frustration and anguish, simply pushed over the edge of the mountains, requiring the men to forge onward carrying mules' loads themselves.

If "war is hell"² to the soldiers and to the physicians who attended to their health needs from the front lines, it is similarly challenging to the animals and their veterinary support team.

Dr. Kenneth I. Gumaer, Sr.

Dr. Gumaer graduated in the spring class of 1943 (January Section) at Cornell University and had been happy to secure a job right out of college with the famous Dr. W.W. Dimock at the University of Kentucky as an assistant pathologist. But within a few months, he had been called into service and assigned to meat inspection in Brooklyn, New York.

That was where he and another veterinarian, Dr. Marshall Waple,³ saw the following words on a sign at the Brooklyn Air Base.

***Wanted: Volunteers for hazardous
and dangerous mission with large animals.***

Both accepted the invitation to join the combat-tactical, dangerous mission as a more exciting alternative to inspecting meat and butter for the army. They immediately traveled to Fort Robinson, Nebraska, where they were assigned to the Quartermaster Pack Troops in Fort Bliss, Texas: Dr. Gumaer to the 31st Pack Troop, and Dr. Waple to the 33rd Pack Troop. From there, they prepared to go overseas.

*"I [Gumaer] had 267 head of mules on board a Liberty ship and there were about 60 soldiers that made up the pack troop. A lot of these guys were also volunteers, having fought in Guadalcanal so they were well-qualified with their combat experience. Three days out of New Orleans, near Key West, Florida, our ship was torpedoed by a U-boat. It was a clear night and we sent out an SOS and they sent planes to scare the subs away and then they towed us into port for repairs. We spent a week in Miami getting major repairs, with the mules still on board. From there, we went to Newport News, for final repairs."*⁴

The mules were housed in the hold or under make-shift sheds on the top deck. They had a very rough Atlantic crossing and many mules developed hematomas, "some as big as bushel baskets," but all except one landed safely in Calcutta after 87 days.^{5,6}

The mules were off-loaded onto rail cars and taken north from Calcutta to a base at Deogarh and readied to move down the Burma (Ledo) trail behind enemy lines to confront the Japanese at an airfield called Myitkyina. Disease and malnutrition was a challenge to both man and mule and just as they started the trek into the jungle road, Gumaer got severe dysentery.

*"We didn't have any American medics with us, so the British-Indian officer took me and dropped me off behind a compound and I got over [the dysentery]. Almost from the beginning, we were behind the Jap lines. [Our presence on the jungle and mountain trails] were a real surprise to the enemy and our troops killed a lot of the Japanese soldiers that would just walk into the fire of our frontal assault."*⁷



*U.S. veterinarian Dr. Kenneth Gumaer
attends to a pack mule on the trail in Burma, 1944.
(Photo provided by Dr. Gumaer)⁸*

Gumaer and his team, which was one of the groups known collectively as Merrill's Marauders, the 5307th Composite Unit (provisional), fought on through the tight jungle and perilous mountain passes of Burma against superior numbers of Japanese until they got to Myitkyina on May 17th, 1944. In five months, the Americans had withstood hunger, diseases and debilitating fevers, traveling 750 miles through some of the harshest jungle terrain in the world and over the treacherous Kumon Mountain range. They reclaimed the pivotal Japanese airfield and turned the tide against the enemy that had held Burma since forcing the British back into India three years earlier. Dr. Gumaer was among those members of Merrill's Marauders awarded the Bronze Star for his meritorious service.

Gumaer's story doesn't end at Myitkyina. He continued over the old Burma Road into China with members of Chiang Kai-shek's forces. While doing a necropsy examination on a horse one afternoon, he was exposed to anthrax. He was hastily transported to a makeshift Chinese hospital and treated with one of the first available doses of aqueous penicillin. Miraculously, he survived, though the scars from his cutaneous lesions persisted throughout his life.

Returning home after the war, Dr. Gumaer began a veterinary practice in his home town of Rhinebeck, New York. Farm animals were the dominant patients in the late 1940s and 1950s until recurring back problems forced him to move gradually into care for the growing number of companion animals in the area.

He joined Sterling Winthrop Research Institute in nearby Rensselaer in 1965 where he worked as a pathologist until his retirement in 1982. Always faithful to his *alma mater*, Ken and his wife,

Catherine, became major contributors to the Cornell and to his beloved veterinary college. In 1998, they were named foremost benefactors of the university, the highest honor awarded to Cornell's donors.



Dr. Kenneth I. Gumaer, foremost benefactor of Cornell University, 1998
Dr. Gumaer's wife, Catherine, was unable to attend the ceremony because of health limitations.
(@ Cornell University)

Dr. Takahema Takahashi

Halfway around the world, Takahema Takahashi was born in 1917, three years earlier than Dr. Gumaer. The middle child of five, Dr. Takahashi told me how his country was seeped with nationalistic fervor following their victory in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War. As a teenager, he would walk with his pet dog to watch military exercises near his home. He longed to become a general or admiral, but he wasn't accepted into the military academy because he was near-sighted. When he learned that physicians and veterinarians could become military officers even with his type of vision deficit, he pursued a career in veterinary medicine as a stepping stone to the military.⁹

When I interviewed 93-year-old Takahashi in 2010, his first words about his journey into combat zone seven decades earlier were,

“We were only informed that we were heading south, and it was not disclosed how many days it would take to reach our destination.”

So began the five-year war journey of a young Japanese veterinary officer in December 1941, as he disembarked from a port in occupied China with approximately 300 horses. Takahashi was charged with the health care of the boatload of horses from their procurement site through the South China Sea to Bangkok, Thailand. From there, they would be expected to travel overland to Rangoon (Yangon), then north to Imphal to attempt to intercept the British as they moved eastward in an effort to free Japanese-controlled supply lines to China.¹⁰

Despite Takahashi's protests, the ship hastily left the Chinese port before the horses could be vaccinated. “Another boat chased us down and hoisted anti-Strangles serum onto the deck and I was able to vaccinate the horses in transit.” To prevent the animals from succumbing to the sweltering heat and humidity of the ship's hold as they coursed further and further into the South China Sea, Takahashi fashioned a series of hoists to periodically raise the horses onto the deck for ventilation and exercise. Despite the grueling challenges of the 25-day trip, they arrived at port in Bangkok without a single loss of equine life.¹¹

The overland trip to Rangoon took many months and Takahashi described to me the afflictions of the horses: emaciation, colic, pneumonia, foot problems. During the subsequent march north towards Imphal, they were ambushed by British forces and most of the horses (and many of the men) were killed.

As they retreated by retracing their path to the coast, the horses that had not already succumbed to starvation or disease were killed by strafing British aircraft while the men retreated into the adjacent jungle.¹² The remaining Japanese soldiers, including Dr. Takahashi, spent the remainder of the war struggling to survive in the Burma jungle under horrific conditions. Their clothes and shoes, at best, were fashioned from ragged strips of old parachutes; often they had neither clothes nor protection for their bare feet. Only a third of the men survived. Those who remained alive at the end of the war were forced by the British to board a train heading east where they spent eight months in a prisoner-of-war camp before being released to return to Japan.¹³



Dr. Takahema Takahashi, Tokyo, Japan, November 2010
Photo by the author

Dr. Takahashi returned home to a family who barely knew him, and from whom he received little respect for his war efforts. “It was never discussed,” he said.¹⁴ Meanwhile, he started to piece together his life and his veterinary career. He started by vaccinating dogs for rabies and gradually became more and more successful in modern small animal practice. He eventually attained the position of president of the Japanese Small Animal Veterinary Association, and later in life welcomed some of his former military adversaries from the British veterinary community to his rebuilt life in Japan.

He spoke with great respect for the British veterinarians whom he came to value as friends and colleagues. He told me how he had exchanged Christmas cards with many of them year after year, then with downcast eyes, he sadly reflected on how the number dwindled as they presumably reached the end of their lives. “I don’t receive any now”, he said.¹⁵ Dr. Takahashi reached the end of his own life one year after I interviewed him.

As I reflect upon the lives of these two deceased WWII veterans, I realize how privileged we are to build upon a legacy of veterinarians whose loyalty, of necessity, was to their country of origin, but also—as in the story of “War Horse” (see story June 11th 16)—was to the animals under their care. Regardless of the circumstances, we remain, it seems, first and foremost, veterinarians caring for the animals entrusted to us.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Veterinary Education and Non-Combat Veterinary Service During World War II. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 18, 2013.

² Originally, a quote of W.H. Sherman, a general in the Union Army, during the War Between the States.

³ Marshall J. Waple, Jr., VMD. Like Dr. Gumaer, Waple accompanied a shipment of mules to the C-B-I theatre, however this ship was destroyed en route and all his mules perished. Waple and Gumaer later met on the Burma Road.

⁴ Gumear, Kenneth I, DVM (retired veterinarian in Styvesant Falls, NY, now deceased). Interview with Dr. Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) and Dr. Richard H. Drumm (East Greenbush, NY). 2007 Oct 15.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14205>

⁵ One mule was destroyed due a fractured femur.

⁶ Gumaer, see ref 4, above.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ This photo also appears in Smith, Donald F. 150th Anniversary of Veterinary Education and the Veterinary Profession in North America: Part 2. 1940-1970. *J Vet Med Educ* 2011 38(1) p 84-99.

⁹ Takahema Takahashi, DVM (retired small animal veterinarian, deceased). Interview in Hotel Westin Tokyo (Japan) with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2010 Nov 8 and 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Several members of the Japanese Veterinary Medical Association were present during my interviews with Dr. Takahashi and subsequent articles were written about our meetings. It was conveyed to me that my interview and the preparation for my visit by Japanese veterinary student, Junya Yasuda and his family, was the first time that Dr. Takahashi's experiences as a veterinary office in World War II had ever been told.

¹⁵ Takahashi, see ref 9, above.

¹⁶ Smith, Donald F. "War Horse," other Animal Warriors and the Veterinarians Who Care for Them. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 11, 2013.

KEYWORDS:

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Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.